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ARCHITECTURE  
BEYOND  
CODE

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## PROBLEMATICS

*“The production of buildings has become so defined by codes – financial codes, building codes, life and safety codes, computer codes, codes of appearance and behavior – that architecture has very little to do with the way they finally appear. [...] We need an architecture that questions reality.”*

Aaron Betsky,  
Manifesto for the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice, 2008

Does architecture have the means to formulate, if not a critique, at least a questioning of the structural logics ruling the contemporary urban environment?

Precisely, does this architectural questioning have a chance to emerge *within* the urban environment?

*Architecture Beyond Code* is a practice-based research, as well as an experiment in criticizing the making of architecture in our present western contexts. It questions the precedence of code over architecture in the construction of our spaces (p. 3); investigates the logic of control embedded in this process (p. 6); and seeks, through architectural interventions, an efficient strategy of critique (p. 8).

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## CODE

ABC starts from a basic claim : architecture is not design<sup>1</sup>.

The fact that, first in its practice, now in its own discourse, architecture has merged into the ubiquitous field of design, is both a confession of its blurred status as a project, and a symptom of a generic indetermination becoming the very form of our systems of exchange.

The production of space, just like production itself, has ended<sup>2</sup>. There are signs of it everywhere – signs are all we still produce, design replaced production as our dominant social process. Once mirrors of our reality, signs no longer reflect any constrained value, determined by a complex of external references. Mirrors now only reflect mirrors – which defines *speculation* – and value has gained an introverted, fluctuant form, modulated through the endless circulation and ceaseless exchange of its signs. Code is what makes this exchange possible: a law of absolute relativity, through distinctive oppositions, of each term to each other within a system. Code is our principle, and design its apostle.

It is through its total submission to code – not only as a law, but as a logic of functioning – that architectural practice turns into design. With its inaugural formula – "form follows function" – modern design transformed objects into signs (form, the signifier, must reflect function, the signified), hence organized them as a system structured by code (a language in its strict sense). Architecture's embracement of the formula led to the expansion of such system, from the objects to the whole urban environment.

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1 This point and its following critical implications are grounded largely upon the thought of Baudrillard – which will provide a conceptual framework for this project – and specifically where this thought intersects with many others, among which Foucault's and Deleuze's.

2 BAUDRILLARD, Jean – "The End of Production" in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Gallimard, 1976.

We went from "form follows function" to "form follows program". The system has only changed its content, not its operative form : the designed form is still submitted to a leader, to the imperative of reflecting, of signifying, of acting as a form/sign. And if the myth of functionality has temporarily anchored the signified to a principle of reality (the function, the use-value), its crumbling has given way to the undetermined and combinatory process of code – through which code itself ensures its own reproduction<sup>3</sup>.

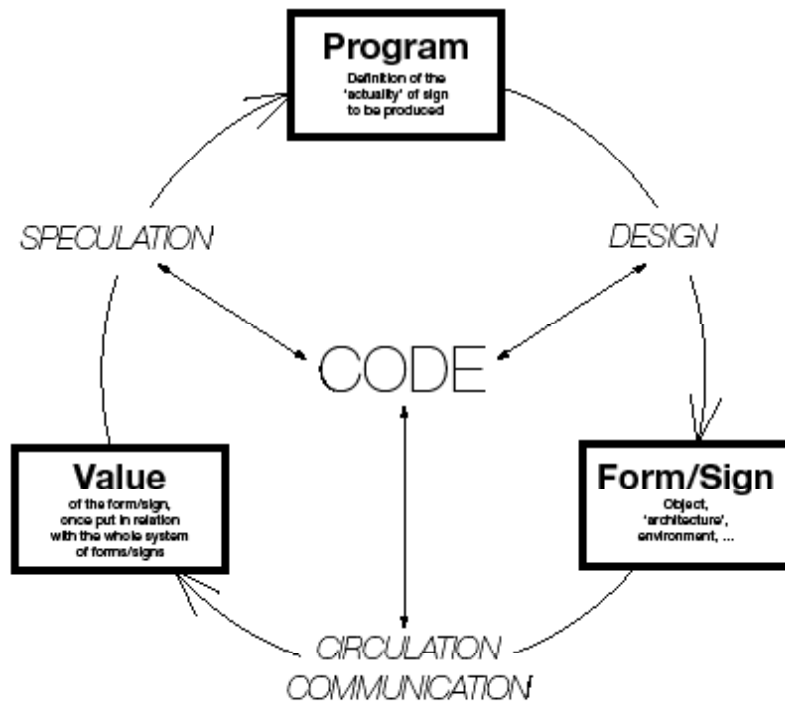
This reproduction drives the overwhelming growth of our societal system, both extensive (through the absorption of every dimension, every modalities of exchange, as well as their former *situations*) and intensive (through the increase of communication between each component of the resulting integrated environment). The effective architecture of this environment, which substitutes for our spaces, is generated by code itself : it consists in the pure enactment of its growth, the programmatic construction of code-mediated paths for value to circulate<sup>4</sup>. By accepting the role of designers that this system assigned to them, architects have not only deserted the field of architecture – that of inventing articulations and configurations of the inhabited spaces – but also became agents of code's reproduction. By limiting their practice to the *performance of a program*, itself emerging through code, they are building manifestos of our system. In the urban environment, architectural practice has become code's "operational semiology"<sup>5</sup>.

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3 From this moment, the parallel with our monetary system is total: the absolute relativity of forms/signs (like currencies) to each other led to the abandon of function (like the Gold Exchange Standard) as a concrete referent of their value – which was thus set free from the requirement of reflecting any piece of reality and could enter a process of pure speculation, mediated by code.  
See BAUDRILLARD, Jean – "Design and Environment" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Sign*, Gallimard, 1972.

4 For example, the urban sprawl is not an accidental process, it doesn't proceed from unrelated factors (such an accidental architecture would give way to the richness of surprise as well as the risk of collapse). On the contrary, the combinatory factors intervening in the expansion of the urban environment are all related through code, whose very process is to maintain the total communication of all parts within the system it structures.

5 BAUDRILLARD, Jean – *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Gallimard, 1976 ; p. 119.



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**CONTROL**

Complaints about the dystopian urban realm and its relentless global expansion, just like enthusiasm toward the spread of communication networks linking people globally, are now commonplaces (perhaps the last *places of the common* left). These of course are two dimensions of the same process, the latter offering a sort of compensation of the former: a simulacrum of social link once the urban environment has achieved to dismantle it. Sociality itself is now designed – it relies on signs, which gain value through their continuous exchange on dedicated, code-structured channels. Here lies the process of control : code delineates the possible paths for messages and value to be structured and to circulate ; it is through the monopoly of the forms of exchange, regardless to its content, that social control is operated. Just like the profusion of commodities, in the age of production, chained up the social body to the logic of consumption, the profusion of signs, in the age of design, permeates the social fabric with the logic of speculation. And speculation leans on total indetermination, on the extermination of references, on the erasement of any exterior to the system<sup>6</sup>.

In the urban environment, such logic reveals itself in the voracity for "re-qualification" of every interstice and margin : negation of their value as *found*, wiping up of the slowly sedimented dimensions of value inherent to the place (historic, symbolic, affective, tasteful and so on). *Inherence* must give way to *coherence*, which now only means integration to the system of speculative value<sup>7</sup>.

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6 Of course, "speculation" here does not only refer to the financial process, but to a general mode of living – in the absence of "solid" references, choices, decisions and actions only lean one's guess of the likely conditions one will soon be confronted to, which only alliments the general uncertainty of the social process. See BAUMAN, Zygmunt – *Liquid modernity*, Polity, 2000.

7 Among many others, the recent re-qualification of the High Line in New York is a paradigmatic example. For decades had this forgotten track been offering to the adventurous and marginal New Yorkers a secret landscape of otherness. Millions of dollars have been invested to dismantle it, to replace the wildly grown vegetation by a carefully designed one, and above all to create proper accesses from the city – turning a former *derobade* into an upteenth entertainment, and a new node for value to converge.

In the establishment of generic indetermination, places are only a secondary target of dismantlement, compared to the body – this old "pivot of the world"<sup>8</sup>. On one level, we assist to the vanishing of the *social body*, former referent for both the institution of and the resistance to the social relations of domination<sup>9</sup>. In fact, its organic articulations, through situations lived *cheek by jowl*, are replaced by an ever-present linkage of dispersed singularities. But this is also true of the *individual body* – progressively disengaged of its daily environment<sup>10</sup>. The increasing mediation of our sensorium blurs the limits and the integrity of the body, as a pillar of consciousness through subjective perception. This is an age of "dividuals"<sup>11</sup>, body itself becomes a sign, disarticulated into a form and its fluctuant value. Identity crisis : the self has nothing stable to be *identical* to, and its new variable geometry is now dynamically defined by its surrounding flux.

Control lies in the omnipresence of code as the one and only path – ensuring conformity by mediating every practice<sup>12</sup>, every form of exchange; modulating a diffuse, decentralized totalitarianism. While design provides code a myriad of ever-compelling façades – the perspective lines of desire now being themselves lines of code – the actual architecture of this system offers for only horizon its reproduction, and as a collateral damage, the eradication of every form of value other than the speculative one. Escaping this mirror palace requires a counter-architecture – an architecture beyond code.

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8 MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice – *Phenomenology of perception*, Gallimard, 1945.

9 Regarding the social body in the disciplinary societies, see FOUCAULT, Michel – *Discipline and Punish*, Gallimard, 1975. Regarding its dismantlement in the societies of control, see DELEUZE, Gilles – "Postscript on the Societies of Control" in *L'autre Journal n°1*, May 1990.

10 This notion is more amply developed in my Master Thesis – "The Disengagement of the Body in Contemporary Space", 2009.

11 DELEUZE, Gilles – *ibid.*

12 AMIN, Ash / THRIFT, Nigel – *Cities: Reimagining urban theory*, Polity, 2002 ; "The modern city exists as a haze of software instructions. Nearly every urban practice is mediated by code."

## — ANTIGRAM

Our system's architecture bears the characteristic of deriving from Program, whose ever-changing content disguise the uniformity of the relations it sets. An effective counter-architecture can only proceed from an antigram, pointing the deconstruction of our programmatic environment and the reversal of its logics as its primary objectives. ABC's antigram will rely on three strategic references, whose interpretation will progressively outline the project's experimental protocol.

### .Code bypass

"The earth is blue like an orange"

Paul Eluard – "The Earth is Blue", 1929

If this system of value based on code has any fear, it is that of hacking<sup>13</sup>, or poetry, which is all one: the clearing of new paths, beyond code, for value or meaning to emerge. Both hacking and poetry manipulate the coded structure of a language and arrange a transcendent architecture within it. The resulting value of this operation is an inherently subversive one: more than in the actual goal attained (technically, the information accessed could still have been reached through coded channels), this value resides in the very act of *going beyond*, of following a path that one has oneself created, *individuated*. Such value can't be *tested* against others, which is the very logic of code, but only *tasted*, hence remains uncodable. Through this subjective perception, one is briefly abstracted from the overwhelming manifestation of code. A gap to hop over is a chance to piece oneself together – as well as a true architectural dare. Programmatic architecture, in the urban environment, underlines a network of channels for each urban practice, ensuring that every path, every spatial relation is mediated by code. A first trail for ABC's interventions will thus consist in putting in tension parallel urban channels, in order to create potentialities of code bypass, of unprogrammed spatial relations.

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13 MCKENZIE WARK – *A Hacker Manifesto*, Harvard University Press, 2004

## .Urban heterotopiae

"[Heterotopiae] have the curious property of being in relation with all the other emplacements, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the whole of relations that happen to be designated, mirrored, or reflected by them."

Michel Foucault – "Of Other Spaces", 1967

The foucauldian concept of heterotopia will occupy a central role in this project. In spite of the hard-working process of absorption they undergo, heterotopiae still subsist between the lines and channels of the urban environment. They form in its interstitial spaces yet not pervaded by Program – and while the urban configurations tend to negate or to screen them, there are always kids to discover them.

By suspending the harassing stream of injunctions that characterizes the urban experience, heterotopiae unfold a sort of teeming emptiness: perception becomes suddenly active again, freed from its constant channeling by Program, and the whole body is re-engaged in an effective interaction with its surrounding, whose form remains to be constructed, invented – which above all is not imposed.

Roofs, underground tunnels, *terrains vagues*, are all urban heterotopiae in that they are places exterior to the thoroughly programmed environment, places from which to *stand back* – which is the first step of any critique. Their equilibrium is fragile : establishing a proper access to them, a derivation of an urban channel that sets them in broadband communication with the urban network, is the best way to dismantle them – which is one of the system's policy. The passage to them must constitute an act of going beyond, like climbing a fence or lifting a trap door. It is only by keeping the limit structured by code – or at least the perception of this limit – that their absolute alterity is maintained.

A second trail of research will focus on the permeability of these limits: adjusting architectural impulses for crossing them, playing with the attraction of beyondness to form sensible vectors, directed toward the existing urban heterotopiae.

Yet, not only do kids discover virgin territories to play, but they also create them, by building *huts*. The actual construction of heterotopiae *within* the urban environment appears like a challenge to be taken up in this project.

## .Interferences

"By tattooing the walls, SUPERSEX and SUPERKOOL free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter, into the moving body of the city before it has been branded with functions and institutions."

Jean Baudrillard, "Kool Killer or the Insurrection by Signs", 1976

The explosion of graffiti in New York during the early seventies, whose account and analysis by Baudrillard<sup>14</sup> is of great use for this project, can be seen as the collective construction of a massive heterotopia, which superimposed to the whole city, dismantling its architectural configuration. In an environment saturated with shameless *full signs*, where the urban layout – the grid – functions as an enactment of their incessant confrontation, the surge of (just as shameless) *empty signs*, which do not confront with the rest of the city but only scream in a foreign language, was enough to put the urban system in crisis. By entirely covering the surfaces in sight, graffiti neutralized the programmatic appearance of New York, and replaced it by a big, infinitely convoluted question mark.

Their offensive was ephemeral – "[code] is able to integrate what negates it as an additional variable"<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, they were still signs, and even if their elementary content – the Name<sup>16</sup> – was first abstruse (hence insurrectional) to their environment, a few waves of mediatization were enough to retire them their *immediateness*, and to assign to them an arbitrary connotation – from which they were recuperated into the usual system of signs exchange. Nevertheless, New York graffiti set a precedent in urban critique : the urban environment was for the first time effectively attacked in its mass-mediatic *form*. While the situationist strategists advocated for "re-functioning", or re-use of the urban system of communication to *say something else*<sup>17</sup> (the *détournement* is still an attack on *content*), graffiti only used such system

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14 BAUDRILLARD Jean – "Kool Killer or the Insurrection by Signs" in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, op.cit.

15 BAUDRILLARD Jean – "Design and Environment" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs*, op.cit.

16 MAILER, Norman – *Faith of Graffiti*, Alskog/Praeger, 1974.

17 DEBORD, Guy / WOLMAN, Gil – "A User's Guide to Détournement" in *Les lèvres nues* n°8, May 1956.

to *amplify interferences*, as to jam the stream of injunctions itself and to let urban spaces recover a primitive virginity (the image of the *urban jungle* acquires all its meaning). As long as this brown noise was reverberated by the city surfaces, a proper *situation* was set, whose coded control was lost.

The Stockholm syndrome that took hold of New Yorkers, who massively militated for the re-framing of their urban condition, calls for a careful analysis of what actually happened with graffiti. An update of the stakes, which will look at the evolution of the global urban condition since the 70's, and the specific features of the urban field within which to intervene, could open a third trail for this project : a redeployment of graffiti's strategy with architectural forms. Keeping its logic of basic means and *superficial* transformations, it will aim at constructing localized heterotopiae. A pertinent screening of the urban environment could form, in its negative space, an architecture of vacancy – to be furnished with one's own fears and desires.

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**OUTCOME**

Going further into this research project would consist in carrying out these experiments (whose site remains to be set) and to document them through texts and videos. As for any form of interventions *in situ*, their documentation should not aim at *rendering* them – since their essential material is a contextualized subjective perception – but at retracing the process that led to them.

There are few chances that I will attain the objectives declared above, that these experiments will actually put Program in check, even very locally. But this of course is not the essential purpose of the project. Its critical dimension lies in the process itself : the exploration of new forms of practicing architecture, the progressive reversal of its axioms, the attempt to exceed its excess.

To truly push architecture beyond code requires to strip it of its dramatic *positive* intentions, so that it does not wish to "build", "raise" or "reach" anything anymore – except a way out.

*"Every man must shout : there is a great negative, destructive work to be done."*

Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto", 1918

**APRIL 2010**  
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